

EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PUBLIC AFFAIRS SECTION

TEL: 8802-8855500

FAX: 880-2-9881677, 9885688

E-MAIL: DhakaPA@state.gov

WEBSITE: <http://dhaka.usembassy.gov>



**REMARKS
BY
AMBASSADOR BERNICAT
COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN BANGLADESH:
PHASE ZERO**

**PACIFIC AREA SPECIAL OPERATIONS CONFERENCE
HONOLULU, HAWAII**

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Good morning Rear Admiral Kilrain and other distinguished guests, friends and colleagues in the fight against extremism, it is an honor for me to speak with you.

We are here today to talk about violent extremism, an issue of crucial concern for all of us. Preventing and countering violent extremism is a pillar of the United States' strategic approach to counter-terrorism. This approach aims to deny terrorism new recruits by reducing sympathy and support for violent extremism in vulnerable communities. And I want to make clear from the beginning, as President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry already have, that there is no room for Islamophobia in this discussion. Dr. Anderson spoke eloquently to this point as well. Violent extremism has claimed lives in every corner of the globe, and Muslim lives most of all.

Today, I stand with President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry and all of you in urging all members of the international community to reject the scourge of violent extremism – including Da'esh, or ISIL – and stand up for peace and security.

When one thinks of violent extremism, Bangladesh does not readily come to mind – and we hope it never will. But that's why our efforts in countries such as Bangladesh are so important. I'd like to present Bangladesh to you today as a case study in how we can – and how we *must* – work in a preventative mode to counter extremist trends before they gain traction.

Bangladesh is big in terms of population – number eight in the world – and also the world’s third most populous Muslim-majority country. It packs 166 million people into a space the size of Iowa, making it the world’s most densely-populated country aside from city-states.

Bangladesh is strategically important to the United States. It is the largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations in the world; it has a rapidly growing economy; it is a key player in South Asia's regional connectivity; and it is a leader among developing countries on advocating for better environmental policies. In its short history as an independent country, Bangladesh has made a progress that is unprecedented in human history in health, food security, and poverty reduction. Not since 19th century Japan has the world seen a country make such significant strides in reducing child and maternal mortality in such a short period of time.

Historically, Bangladesh has identified itself as a tolerant country with strong democratic roots. Bangladesh proudly espouses social harmony; counting Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians, as well as members of a number of indigenous ethnic groups, among its citizens.

Bangladesh is a moderate country and a valued security partner that offers a viable alternative to violent extremism in a troubled part of the world. Bangladesh recognizes the threat of violent extremism and has adopted an active CVE program as a demonstration of its commitment to combating domestic and transnational terrorist groups. While Bangladesh’s counterterrorism efforts have made it harder for transnational terrorists to operate there, violent extremists are attempting to exploit the country’s existing societal tensions and the vulnerability those tensions create. To its credit, however, Bangladesh is not gripped by extremism.

When it comes to countering violent extremism, Bangladesh is at what the Department of Defense calls Phase Zero. This means that the opportunity still exists to thwart potential threats by dissuading would-be extremists in a **proactive** rather than **reactive** way. And let’s not kid ourselves – the threats are real. Many Bangladeshis fear what they view as a rising threat of extremism, and they point to some recent events and trends as evidence that Bangladesh must maintain its vigilance:

- In a September 2014 audio message, al-Qa’ida chief Ayman al-Zawahiri stated his intent to establish a greater presence in Bangladesh.
- And expatriate Bangladeshis have been arrested for attempting to recruit fellow citizens to join Da’esh.

- Some in Bangladesh view the growth in the number of madrassas funded primarily through foreign donations as a cause for concern.
- Banned extremist groups are using social media to spread their radical ideologies and recruit foreign fighters.
- In October 2012, a 21-year old Bangladeshi student was caught trying to blow up the Federal Reserve Bank in New York.
- In February 2013, blogger Rajib Haider was hacked to death with machetes for protesting against Islamist leadership and for comments he had posted online about religious fundamentalism.
- In May 2013, thousands of protesters descended on Dhaka, filling the streets and demanding the execution of “atheist” bloggers and a ban on the mixing of men and women in public.
- In the last two months, two more bloggers, one of whom was an American citizen, were hacked to death with machetes for their atheist writings. Al-Qaida in the Indian Sub-Continent has just claimed responsibility for the murder of the American citizen blogger.
- In the most recent murder, two suspects were caught at the scene of the crime, and they reported that a contact who called himself “Masum” (mah-SOOM) – which, ironically, means “innocent” in Bangla – had provided them with a photo and an address and instructed them to kill the blogger for writing against Islam. The attackers did not know the blogger and had never read any of his writings.

It is worth noting that among those accused in the blogger murders are students from private, top-tier universities, contradicting a conventional wisdom that militancy grows out of poverty and a lack of other options.

While this type of extremist violence isn’t unique to Bangladesh, Bangladeshi citizens are concerned that it is occurring with increased and disturbing frequency. And while it would be inaccurate to suggest that Bangladesh is gripped by extremist violence, it is absolutely worth our

investment to engage in preventative work to erode the sympathy and support for violent extremism among at-risk populations.

In general, when we consider what makes an individual vulnerable to extremist recruitment, we know that, when one believes that the rule of law is weak, government services are not equitably distributed, or space for dissent is restricted, that individual is more susceptible to extremists' messages. And while governments use force to clamp down on militancy, force must be coupled with efforts to address these underlying socio-political conditions, structures and grievances that make individuals and communities vulnerable to radicalization. This is a balance every nation fighting extremism must find.

Bangladesh and the United States partner on a number of programs to deter extremist tendencies by opening channels for dissent, increasing civic opportunities for young people, strengthening the relationship between the public and law enforcement, countering terrorist financing, and helping provide professional religious resources for members of the armed forces.

I would like to offer to you examples primarily of initiatives the U.S. Government is taking in Bangladesh from a practitioner's point of view. I will not be including, for the sake of time, the many initiatives the Government of Bangladesh sponsors on its own or in conjunction with other governments or international organizations. Some examples of our Embassy's efforts include:

- The U.S. Embassy Dhaka Facebook page has 1.6 million fans, the majority of whom are young men between the ages of 18 and 34. Ours is the second-largest Embassy Facebook page in the world, and it ranks number one in terms of engagement. We don't mind when our Facebook fans disagree with us or question our policies. The majority, for example, vehemently condemned the atheist writings of the murdered bloggers. However, the vast majority also wrote that murder is not the answer and is not part of their understanding of jihad. Through lively Facebook discussions, we engage the same kinds of students who were influenced by Masum, creating a forum for expression that leads to positive exchanges on controversial issues, including extremism.
- The Public Affairs Section of our Embassy also reaches out to economically disadvantaged 14- to 18-year old madrasa students through its after-school English Access Micro Scholarship program. This program offers intensive study sessions and activities that give students the ability to participate successfully in the socio-economic development of Bangladesh. The Access program was launched in the fall of 2004 and

was the first program of its kind to target both governmental and non-governmental madrasa students, offering them a wider window to the outside world through English language competency. Nearly 500 students, including both boys and girls, have benefitted from this program, which helps them to take an active role in the development of their communities as well as develop themselves.

- Young people who are especially attracted to violent extremism often feel left out of established political structures. To encourage young people, USAID has created six-month fellowship opportunities for young aspiring political leaders to strengthen the role of youth in party leadership structures. USAID also works to reduce electoral and political violence in Bangladesh with programs aimed at helping citizens identify the root causes of violence and fostering dialogue between opposing groups. The three-day training allows participants to analyze causes of violence and better understand conflict dynamics throughout the election cycle.
- One of the appeals of violent extremist groups is their practice of strict and immediate so-called justice. To counter their appeal, we are helping to strengthen community policing. The Department of Justice's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP) works extensively to develop trust and communication between the public and law enforcement. ICITAP's community-based policing program breaks down longstanding barriers between the public and law enforcement by building police-citizen partnerships. This effort re-enforces the country's overall stability by providing a stronger, more responsive security network and strengthening governance in areas vulnerable to extremism. ICITAP programs also facilitate better relationships between students and local police through workshops meant to increase communication between these two polarized groups.
- The Department of Justice's Office of Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training (OPDAT) runs a number of programs and conferences on countering terrorist financing. OPDAT has presented best practices in charitable giving to both government and non-profit organizations, educators, and other civil society leaders. It has also created a platform for dialogue between the Embassy, the Central Bank of Bangladesh, and CEOs of the major Islamic, private and state banks in Bangladesh to routinely engage in identifying risks and emerging trends in terrorist financing. Finally, OPDAT has developed a cybercrime curriculum for the Bangladesh National Police Staff College; and arranged regional counterterrorism conferences for law enforcement personnel.

- Further, we remain cognizant of the fact every effort we make to help Bangladesh fight transnational crime also fights terrorism. Increasingly, traffickers in persons, drugs, arms, commercial goods and wildlife, in addition to money, either have a financial link to terrorist organizations or are themselves terrorists funding expensive operations and networks. The U.S. is helping Bangladesh fight these crimes, especially through their robust responses to trafficking in persons, Bengal tiger conservation and a new DEA assistance to stem the tide of precursor chemicals illegally traded across its borders. We are also helping Bangladesh stand up a special prosecutor's office for transnational crime to develop the investigative skills and successfully prosecute those who perpetrate these complex and increasingly technical crimes without borders.
- I'd also like to take this opportunity to applaud the Bangladesh Army's efforts to establish a professional corps of religious counselors. The Bangladesh military has demonstrated a progressive approach to address extremists who target young men looking for spiritual sustenance. With this in mind, the Bangladesh Army has sent four of their officers to a five-month U.S. Army Chaplain's course, which is designed to develop military religious counselors, regardless of faith. These officers will be better equipped to counter extremist rhetoric within Bangladesh's Armed forces.
- And finally, we have our PACOM Augmentation Team, or PAT. The PAT is a group of specially selected Officers and NCOs who are tactically controlled by Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC). In Bangladesh, the PAT contains an Information Support Team, Civil Military Support Element, and Foreign Liaison Teams who address regional threats by coordinating with the Bangladesh security forces and the U.S. Department of Defense. The Information Support Team focuses on countering violent extremism by partnering in efforts such as the student and police workshops mentioned above. Partnerships such as these have further developed Bangladesh's capacity to address counterterrorism threats in the region since 2008. The focused collective efforts of the PAT encourage improved interoperability between Bangladesh security forces to dissuade and deter potential adversaries.

Bangladesh has the advantage of not having moved beyond Phase Zero. We must remain vigilant, however, to ensure Bangladesh remains at Phase Zero. We commend efforts by the

Government of Bangladesh, civil society, non-governmental organizations, religious organizations, other embassies, and donors who are all partnering in this fight against extremism. We are eager to build on past achievements and lessons learned. We also thank the Government of Bangladesh -- and all governments who participated -- for their contributions to the recent CVE Summit in Washington. In the aftermath of that summit, we renew our commitment to working with Bangladesh to block efforts of terrorists to make inroads in that country by strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law, increasing opportunities for young people to participate in the socio-economic future of their country, and growing the economy so that Bangladesh can achieve its very real goal of middle-income status by 2021.

My fellow delegates from Bangladesh and I are here today because both of our countries value the opportunity to coordinate with international partners to deter and dissuade extremists successfully. This is essential to Bangladesh's remaining at Phase Zero. This PASOC conference is a prime example of how we can join forces, coordinate and promote a common understanding of the global threat that affects all of us and learn better how to counter it. Getting ahead of that threat is what will safeguard the people of Bangladesh, the people of this region, and the people of the world.

The last two slides include the names of points of contact who manage the various programs I described and links to our various social media platforms. I encourage you to reach out to any of my staff to learn more about what they do and to learn how you can develop programs for your own countries.

In closing, I would like to thank Special Operations Command for convening this conference, and to thank you, the participants, for your dedication, determination and efforts to safeguard our global community and to protect our fellow citizens. Thank you.

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**As prepared for Delivery*